Divine contractions: Gods labor, our deliverance

by Lauren F. Winner in the March 18, 2015 issue

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I remember the first time I encountered the image of God as a laboring woman. I was reading Isaiah for an Old Testament class I took in seminary, and I was, it must be admitted, sort of skimming. Then I came to the middle of chapter 42, and I was stopped cold: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant” (v. 14).

What came to mind was a photograph I had once seen, an old, grainy, black-and-white photograph from the feminist 1970s (could it have been printed in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*?) of a woman in a hospital bed, her long blond hair tied back from her face, her right hand on her forehead, a nurse’s hands on her engorged stomach, her face knotted in agony. Although it was just a photograph, you could practically hear a low, loud groan emerging from her throat.

So there I was sitting on my sofa, reading Isaiah and picturing that blond, anguished woman; God’s face contorted in struggle; God groaning the way that laboring woman in the photograph groaned—I pictured all that, and I felt profoundly uncomfortable. I felt disturbed.

This turns out to be just one of three images of childbirth Isaiah uses to characterize God. In addition to depicting God as a laboring woman, Isaiah also likens God to a midwife and a nursing mother. These images compel me, in part because Isaiah is naming as the activity of God something readily available to most of the world's women. In our own cultural moment, of course, an unprecedented number of women are like me—they have neither given birth nor witnessed a birth—and an unprecedented number of men have participated in births. (This cluster of images, which may have for much of history been primarily available to women, is, with fathers' moving into delivery rooms, now more directly available to men.) These birthing images compel me because they speak of God's intimate, bodily involvement with our redemption. They compel me in their suggestion of a divine body that suffers, changes, swells, and leaks. For me, a divine body that leaks is also a divine body that discomfits; Isaiah's pictures compel me precisely in their discomfiture.

The section of Isaiah in which the laboring woman appears (a section scholars call Deutero-Isaiah) was written while a significant slice of the Judean population was living in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem had been politically and militarily trounced, and its people were living in alien territory, with no realistic hope of imminent return. Deutero-Isaiah was written in the wake of this catastrophe, and the text aims to assure the exiled people that God has not abandoned them: God is present; God is at work, tending to God's people even now, even though the exiles might have felt forgotten and renounced.

At Christmas we read Isaiah's words about proclaiming peace and bringing good tidings, and on Good Friday we read his description of a suffering servant being pierced for our transgressions. We do not often hear in church the passage that figures God as a woman in labor, however; if you attend a church that follows the lectionary, you will never hear that verse read on Sunday from the lectern. Perhaps the lectionary crafters find the picture of God squatting and grunting in labor as disconcerting as I do.

Here is what is going on in the verses just before the laboring woman image. God announces that old things are passing away, and that soon God will bring about something new. Then a narrator invites a large convocation to celebrate God and God's declaration by singing "a new song." Next, God speaks again, describing the new, redemptive action that God is about to undertake on behalf of God's people. "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I

will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant."

Isaiah's metaphor, which is much more specific than "God is like a woman in labor," derives its punch from real women groaning in labor. Isaiah focuses on God's breathing and the sound of that breathing: in this one verse, Isaiah uses three verbs that pertain to breath. The first is *pa'ah*, often translated as "cry out"—but "groan" or "bellow" is a better translation. I have often heard women describe the sounds they make in labor in animal terms. "Deep guttural, almost animal noises came from within me. Loud noises. Noises I soon had no control over." This animal breathing is what we hear in Isaiah's first verb. The next two breathing words in the verse continue to stress that God's breath is not at ease: God "gasps" (*nasham*) and "pants" (*sha'aph*).

Why does Isaiah focus so much attention on breathing? One answer may be found in an echo of earlier biblical breath. At the dawn of creation God breathed into Adam; so too, here in Isaiah's promise of new creation, God's breath is the agent of life. For Christians the image may also anticipate the church's efforts to speak about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit—the very word *spirit* is tied to breath, to aspiration (and the New Testament's word for "spirit," *pneuma*, is also the Greek term for breath). It is this Holy Spirit who, Paul tells us in Romans, prays for us with deep groans.

But I would suggest that more important for Isaiah's metaphor is the centrality of breathing to a woman's experience of labor. Panting and groaning are part of how women manage the pain of childbirth. "The key to the patient's ability to suppress pain lies in her . . . breathing," wrote Priscilla Richardson Ulin, a nurse, in 1963. The groans of labor signal the woman's active participation in the birthing process, a participation that does not fight the pain (fighting labor pain only makes the pain worse). Isaiah gives us this groaning woman as a picture of the sovereign God, the God who is in control of redemption: God chooses to participate in the work of new creation with bellowing and panting. God chooses a participation that does not fight the pain, but that works from inside the pain.

When discussing pain in childbirth, Christian readers have rarely turned to Isaiah. Far more often, the Christian tradition has focused on Genesis 3, where pain in childbirth is meted out to women as a punishment for Eve's eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Throughout the history of the church many Christian interpreters have thought labor to be unbearable—because of its physical pain, but

also unbearably shameful because of its connection with the Fall. In this interpretation, pain at childbirth signals Eve's alienation (and that of any individual pregnant woman) from God and God's holiness.

Isaiah seems to refute that distancing—God will be identified with humanity, utterly, even in those things that testify to our sin. As the laboring woman, God takes on the very punishment God assigned to us. God pointedly enters into the parts of our life that bespeak our finitude and "misdirected desire"—and Isaiah's metaphor converts the groans of childbirth from a sign of humanity's fallenness to a sign of God's intimate identification with us. The groans of childbirth are both a sign of humanity's distance from God and a sign of God's nearness to us (they're the second exactly because they're also the first).

Today women talk and write about groaning as an aid to labor. Groaning helps relax the woman's entire body, especially the pelvic area, making it possible for the baby to make her way out. Midwife Ina May Gaskin likes to say, "Open mouth, open bottom." In other words, "a relaxed mouth means a more elastic cervix." Gaskin encourages laboring women to "make a sound pitched low enough to vibrate your chest." It is by panting and groaning that a woman relaxes her body so that her cervix can dilate and the baby can be born.

Groans also communicate the woman's need for assistance: women do not go through delivery alone, but are usually assisted by a spouse, doula, midwife, doctor, friend, or relative. I suggest that we read in Isaiah 42 a suggestion that we—we who worship the God who has redeemed and is redeeming us—participate and play a role in the birthing process. Remember that the passage in which the laboring woman appears begins with the injunction to sing a new song to the Lord: "All who want to worship the Lord, come and sing a new song." The invitation is not unique to Isaiah; the psalmist also enjoins, "Sing to the Lord a new song." What is the musical invitation doing in Isaiah, before the description of God groaning in labor? It is, I suggest, inviting the convocation, the potential singers, to help God during God's delivery.

In ancient Greece, birth attendants sometimes played the lute to soothe the pains of laboring women. Contemporary studies of laboring women around the world, from Thailand to Ontario, show that women who listen to music during labor experience less pain and distress than women whose labors are nonmusical. Music helps women relax or withdraw themselves from the pain of labor and focus on the work of

laboring.

The next time you're belting out a hymn in church, consider that the hymn is the music that helps the laboring mother God focus on delivery. Perhaps our music, our new song, helps God in birthing the new creation. God is redeeming us, yet we are the singers encouraging God in the work of delivering a renewed creation. Thus the passage in Isaiah may suggest a sort of Möbius strip of redemption, in which God is redeeming, God is suffering the pains of redemption, and, as we are being redeemed, the new song we sing helps—helps God breathe, helps God relax, helps God feel less pain, helps God deliver.

In my efforts to understand Isaiah's image of God gasping and panting in labor, I have collected a lot of birth stories from books and from friends. My friend the writer Stina Kielsmeier-Cook tells me that there comes a point in nearly every birth story when the woman does not believe she can keep going (see Kielsmeier-Cook's writing on this point at her blog "What Life Does," September 15, 2014). The laboring woman is no longer focused on meeting her baby; she just wants the pain to stop. She says, "I cannot do this anymore." Stina says this reminds her of Jesus.

We know that in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays, "Please, Lord, take this cup from me." For a moment—before Jesus says: "Yet, not my will but yours be done"—he is the mother in labor saying, "I cannot do this anymore." Jesus knew that new life would be born out of his suffering on the cross, yet he still asked God to take away the cup.

What is spoken to the mother in the moment when she feels she cannot continue is crucial. A good midwife or doula will look the woman in the eyes, remind her of her strength, and remind her of the baby she is about to meet. "It's a moment that stands still in most birthing mothers' memories," says Stina.

I wonder what Jesus heard his father say in the garden. Whatever it was let Jesus go on.

When I think about the hard work of labor, I realize that my unreflective assumption is somehow that redemption is easy for God. Because God is all-powerful, I somehow imagine redemption being a snap of the divine fingers. But Isaiah's image tells us how hard God the laboring woman is working to bring forth redemption, a kind of hard work that many of us may be unaccustomed to in our technological 21st-century world. Underpinning the hard work is the profound strength of laboring. "I

felt so strong, primeval, and powerful. I experienced a trust in my own body that I'd never known before," recalls one mother.

At the same time that laboring is an experience of strength and power, it is also an experience of bodily vulnerability. That is the core of my discomfort with Isaiah's picture of God's groaning in labor: it makes me uncomfortable to think of God groaning in pain, God bleeding, God's body uncontrollably shaking, God exhausted.

The image of God as a laboring woman puts together strength and vulnerability in a way that tells us something about God and how God works. The point is not just that God is vulnerable, although that itself is startling. The point is that in the struggles of labor, we can learn what strength is. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, then strength is not about refusing to cry or denying pain. Strength is not about being in charge, or being independent, or being dignified. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, then strength entails enduring, receiving help and support, being open to pain and risk. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, strength entails entrusting yourself (to medicine, or to the wisdom of your own body, or to the guidance of someone who is there in the room with you). Strength even entails giving yourself over to the possibility of death.

Let's return to the context of Deutero-Isaiah. The people are in exile. Isaiah is writing to reassure them of God's abiding interest in them and to reassure them that God is sovereign. A woman in labor is a curious picture of sovereignty. A woman in labor cannot protect herself. She is dependent on others—and at the same time, she is exercising a profound power. She is receiving help—and at the same time, her body is strong and knows what to do to deliver. Hers is a sovereignty in which the best tool is not a scepter or a gun, but breath: panting, groaning, and bellowing. In their darkest hour the exiles wondered, "God, where are you?" In his final hour Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the image of the laboring woman we see that God does not respond with silence. God groans, gasps, and pants—making a new way for the exiles, breathing life into the whole of creation, offering God's own body to be broken open for the sake of the world God created. Of course, Christianity has always claimed that strength and power are something different than we had assumed they were. Christianity has usually told us to look at the cross to see how this is so, but maybe Isaiah is saying that we could just as well look at the birthing stool.

Still, thinking of God this way—the exposed female body, shaking and in pain—leaves me feeling unnerved and a touch frantic. Do I really want a God with a body? With this kind of body?

I walk around town pondering my unease with Isaiah's travailing God. Why does this image so unsettle me? Why does it make my shoulders tense?

It is the middle of Lent. I walk through the obstetrics unit at the hospital next door to my office. There—looking at the newborns and the new parents, looking at the nurses, a chaplain, and one very ebullient grandmother—I realize that my own discomfort includes not just theoretical worry about a God's vulnerability but fear of my own vulnerability. Isaiah's picture of God suggests that those moments when I stop fighting my own vulnerability are exactly the moments when I most participate in God's very nature, in God's very life. (Do I really want a God with a body? Would I prefer a God who lives as I try to live—mostly in my head?)

We are moving toward Good Friday, the day on which we devote ourselves to recalling and praying about the crucifixion. I am beginning to think that discomfort is a perfectly appropriate response to God's groaning labor. I am beginning to think that maybe I should have exactly this reaction, this wild unease, not just when I ponder Isaiah 42, but when I ponder the cross. I should read about the crucifixion and see there, too, God in bodily vulnerability—anguish, bleeding, the very opposite of control. Whatever I think or feel about God's body when I imagine God groaning and panting in labor, I should also think or feel when I remember God executed by a Roman prefect: if panic, then panic; if something high-minded and Pauline about strength in weakness, the same.

But I don't. I picture Jesus on the cross, and I feel very little. The crucifixion has become so sanitized in my mind, so normalized and familiar, that thinking of it does not really produce much reaction at all. I, along with much of the church, have turned a bloody state punishment into nothing more or less than tidy doctrine. Perhaps God as a woman in travail can remind me of God's vulnerability and the centrality of that vulnerability for my relationship with that God.

Of course, God's vulnerability does not begin or end on the cross. God's election of a particular people makes God vulnerable to the people's refusal of life with God. The incarnation makes God vulnerable to all the ravages of human life. And the calling of the church—the naming of a collection of human beings as God's own body—makes

God vulnerable to our continued failings, our continued rejections, our continued refusals to be God's body. "God is vulnerable because God loves," writes William Placher.

And that is the rub: I have removed myself from the discomfort Isaiah provokes. In one short paragraph I have carried myself from God panting and groaning on a delivery table to something anesthetized and lovely, something polite and glassy and far away: just as the church so often turns the crucifixion into the theological abstraction of "the cross," I have turned God's labored grunting neatly into "love." But the verse from Isaiah doesn't say anything abstract or polite. The verse from Isaiah tells me that God squats and pants and bellows like a moose.

On Good Friday I will read, as I always do, the story of Jesus' arrest and execution. But in hopes that I might hear that story for what it is—an account of God given over to vulnerability for our sake—I will also read Isaiah's depiction of God as a woman in travail: "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will bellow like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant."